

Contains heavy reference to 1918 pandemic

Wendy sat by herself, floating a little papyrus boat on a puddle. As he approached, she overturned the boat, dumping out its tiny occupant, a doll made of small twigs and grass. She watched it floating on the surface with expressionless eyes. She did not acknowledge Maxwell standing over her.

“Good day, Wendy,” he said when he tired of waiting.

“Good day.” She did not look up.

“I’m surprised you’ve been allowed out by yourself, what with the danger ‘round every corner.”

“I haven’t,” she said. At that moment Maxwell heard pounding footsteps and all of a sudden Higgsbury stood between himself and his young niece, skinny arms flung out wide. One grimy paw clutched a blue-gemmed staff.

“Chaperoning, are you?” Maxwell asked. “From way over there? If I were a hound she’d be dead by now.”

“If you were a hound I would have frozen you from over there,” Wilson countered. He scowled. “I might freeze you anyway.”

“I assure you,” said Maxwell, “I have no violent intentions.”

Wendy turned back to her play, ignoring the two men.

“What did you want with her?” Wilson demanded, with a glower that might have frightened a very small mouse.

Clearly, Maxwell could not be honest- Higgsbury would be absolutely dyspeptic and he was a tattler. Maxwell would simply not be allowed near Wendy again for quite some time. Perhaps he could... shift his sights. This was not a roadblock, but an opportunity.

He clapped a hand on Wilson's shoulder, causing the little man to flinch (always so sensitive). "I was merely giving her a polite greeting. It is you, my fine fellow, whom I was searching for."

"You didn't even know I was there."

"That's why I was *searching*. Try to keep up. I have an experiment in mind. You're fond of experiments, aren't you?"

Wilson's pointy nose scrunched up in disapproval. "With you?"

"I've reformed, you know." He squeezed Wilson's bony shoulder. "This is all on the up and up, I assure you."

Wilson took a deep breath, grabbed Maxwell's wrist with a clammy cold-fishy corpse-hand, and forcibly removed Maxwell's hand from his shoulder. "Fool me once," he said, "shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me. I refuse to fall for it a third time!"

As Maxwell was formulating a response, help came from an unexpected source: "I hardly believe he could make your lot any worse than it is now, Wilson."

That was Wendy's small, calm voice. Wilson turned to look at her in distraught silence.

Maxwell shrugged. "If you'd like to know what this is all about, meet me at my camp at dusk." He turned and walked away.

Curiosity would do the rest.

"f I lose my mind completely I just may do that!" Higgsbury shrilled after him.

"Why, imagine seeing you here." Maxwell sat by his firepit, tending the blade of the nightmare sword- it had gotten rather messy from hounds. Higgsbury stood at the edge of the firelight, tiny fists trembling at his sides.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"I might well be asking you that question, you're the one who popped in unannounced."

Wilson just pouted at him.

"I will assume you came to ask about my experiment." Maxwell leaned back, stretching his legs. "I'm sure you've noticed that dreams have a certain... importance here." He wagged the sword. Its blade did not catch the light the way the blade of an ordinary sword might, for this sword was composed of pure darkness. "I've decided to try to enter the dream world. It may have answers to certain pertinent questions. However, I'll need to use the portal of a human mind."

“Oh. You want to enter my mind. The seat of my being and the source of my livelihood and very sense of self.” Wilson put his hands on his hips. “This is a wonderful plan. I’m really enthusiastic about this plan.”

“You won’t be aware of anything and it may help your little friends.”

Wilson ran his fingers through his ludicrous mop of hair. “Why should I believe you about that? Or about anything ever again?!”

“I’m not making you do anything,” said Maxwell. “You can turn around and leave right now, if you like.”

“I think I will. Thank you for giving me permission. That’s really important.”

Higgsbury turned away and Maxwell said to his back: “I’ll find someone else.”

He spun on his heel. “I’ll warn them!”

“Good man. You do that. I’m sure it’ll be effective and I’ll be foiled.”

“Why wouldn’t they believe me?”

“They will.” Maxwell sighed. “I’m a bit disappointed, you know. I didn’t think you were quite this selfish.”

Wilson ground his teeth and scuffed at the dirt. “What exactly is selfish about resisting your machinations?”

“I didn’t think me getting a brief peek at your little mind was such an important thing that you’d deny me a chance to find us a way out of here over it. Trust me, pal, I’m not interested and I’ll avoid seeing any more than necessary.”

“It’s not the seeing I’m worried about, it’s meddling and linking my mind to unexplained forces.”

“Your mind is already linked to them whether you like it or not.”

Wilson peered at him for one long moment. Maxwell could see the gears turning, creakily, slowly.

“What would I have to do?” he asked finally.

“Just close your eyes and doze.” Maxwell put away his treasured sword, carefully tucking it into the sheath he’d made for it out of silk. The sword didn’t need a sheath- it didn’t cut unless ordered to- but it looked nice.

Wilson squinted. “Somehow I’m not sleepy.”

“One second. I do believe I have something here that may help with that.” The pan flute was wearing out and sadly he had no mandrakes to replace it with- they were just too delectable as a tea to stay in his chests for long. He’d have to talk Wickerbottom into lending him a sleep-book. Because of his insomnia. Because he was old and frail. Puppy-eyes, sad face.

For now, though, there was enough life left in this thing to deal with Wilson. The patient eyed the flute and looked back at Maxwell. There was a very particular look of defeat Wilson got when he thought he'd been swindled. A sad, resigned, self-pitying look. "I don't suppose I could still just leave."

"Of course you could," said Maxwell, "I wouldn't stop you. End the whole plan here if you like, and we'll just never know if it could have helped."

Wilson had a very particular sigh when he thought he was being put upon.

"The worst that can happen," said Maxwell, "is that you'll have a bad dream."

"Hmph. Just let me lie down somewhere comfortable first," he said, "I don't care to wake up with scrapes, cramps, bruises or foreign objects embedded in my flesh."

"What happens to you often, does it?"

Wilson made a huffy sound. He withdrew a shoddily-made straw roll from his backpack. Maxwell had to wait for him to spread it out and then kneel down and knead the little humps and dips out of it before he finally curled up atop it, looking forlorn.

"Comfy?" Maxwell asked.

"Physically."

"Good, good." Maxwell played a little ditty and his subject obligingly conked out like a light.

This was really for the best. Maxwell had planned to offer this experiment to Wendy because her mind was likely to be the least odious out of all of them and, hey, maybe he could help her out while he was in there. But, even though he had planned this out meticulously, he supposed there was a faint chance things could go a bit awry. And if something did go wrong, he wanted it to happen to Wilson.

Or Wes, but the thought of seeing went on in that one's mind was, frankly, terrifying. There couldn't be much lurking in Wilson's empty little fuzzball head to put anyone ill at ease.

Time to begin. Maxwell opened the Codex Umbra and stooped down, pressing his fingertips to the center of Wilson's forehead. The next bit was very much like creating a shadow helper, he was just projecting most of his consciousness into it instead of the bare minimum, and projecting it into Wilson's mind. Unpleasant, but worth a shot.

The passage was dark, and once he landed his senses took some time to orient themselves to another man's dream-world. When sound and imagery returned, he was watching Wilson amble slowly through the forest.

It was a bit like Maxwell's forest, the one he'd created for the little piggies and spiders and puppets to live in, but only a bit. Trees were enormous, with trunks as big around as houses. Everything was rather gray. Shadows were stark and fell wherever they pleased, ignoring the light.

Maxwell poked one in an attempt to provoke it. It was really just a dream shadow. Nothing living or seeking prey.

Wilson walked slowly, stopping from time to time to look about himself without much interest. Maxwell kept pace beside him for a bit. The ground felt odd under his feet and he realized there was a fine coating of ash over the bare dirt. Nothing nearby appeared to be burned, but there was a smoky scent in the air.

Maxwell was not entirely certain how to proceed now that he was inside the dream. He'd expected the influence of the otherworldly entities who lived in this realm to be obvious, and a possible approach to be equally obvious. This was not so. Perhaps They would present themselves later...

Or perhaps he could merely step out. The surroundings grew blurry and ill-defined off in the distance as they receded from Wilson's awareness. Quite possibly Maxwell could walk out of the bounds of the dream and end up in the realm that lay outside of it. He set off at a brisk pace and with a jolt he found himself back in the real world, kneeling by the fire and looking into Wilson's sleeping face- utterly calm and unaware of the trouble he was causing.

So no walking out. Maxwell re-entered the dream and found the same landscape as before, with Wilson still wandering about in it. What a dull, stupid, tiny man.

He followed Wilson around for a bit. The only remotely interesting thing that the 'scientist' did was to squat down after a bit and poke at something that was sticking out of the ash on the ground- a little bone, it was, very tiny and fine.

"Human," Wilson said.

"I see," Maxwell answered automatically.

Wilson straightened up into a standing position. "I've got to go to work now."

"I suppose that means playing in your laboratory." Or it could mean more wandering around doing nothing. Dreams did not always make sense.

"No, I've got to go to work." Wilson looked at a thing strapped to his wrist- it was a wrist-watch, because of course Wilson was tacky enough to wear a wrist-watch and not a perfectly good pocket-watch despite the fact that he was wearing a waistcoat with extra pockets and God had made waistcoat pockets to put watches in. Wilson had not been wearing the hideous thing a second ago, of course, and at no point had he attached it- it had sprouted out of dream necessity.

Maxwell realized that at no point had he suspected that Wilson would react to his presence in the dream. "You know I'm here, eh?"

"You're always in here with me," said Wilson, looking forlorn.

“Ah.” Maxwell glanced aside and noticed that the closest tree now had a little door in it. Wilson walked up to it- his footsteps squelched slightly- and unlocked it with a small key. His clothing had changed utterly while out of Maxwell’s sight, he was currently wearing a long white coat and a surgical mask. Playing dress-up now, eh?

Wilson stepped through the door. Immediately, the forest setting began to fade into nothing. Maxwell hurried after him, lest he be kicked out of the dream again.

Inside Maxwell had an instant impression of dark red and of moistness. For some time the ground underfoot had begun to be inexplicably damp. Now it was slimy. There was a dolorously heavy odor, thick and fetid.

Maxwell looked down. His smart and shiny wingtip was embedded firmly into something soft and red.

“Be careful with the materials, please.” Wilson spoke with a quiet air of authority that sat in his voice the same way a birthday hat sat on a cat: one could put it there, but it plainly didn’t belong. He was leaning over a table in the middle of the room.

All about him, coating the walls, covering the floor, even dangling from the ceiling, was a sea of organic reds-browns-grays-yellows-greens, in which Maxwell could distinguish bodies and bits of bodies scattered here and there among a stew of unidentifiable viscera. Here and there was even a face, most of them blue, swollen and leaking blood from the nose, some foaming from the mouth. Many of the bits swarmed with maggots.

It was not often that Maxwell did not know what to say.

Wilson's head was bent over a form on the table. "Poor sap," he said. "Didn't have a chance. His lungs are foaming like anything. See there?" He pointed. Though not by any means a squeamish man, Maxwell was a tad reluctant to look- but look he did. Through the convenient impossibility of dreams, the corpse's lungs had been transported to above his body, where they hovered in midair. They were indeed coated with foam.

"Clearly influenza," said Wilson. "But they all are, anyway. Could you please open one of those drawers for me?"

"Drawers?"

Wilson was pointing at the opposite wall from the point they had entered. It was lined with large drawers. Wolfgang was sitting up against that wall. Most of his internal organs were missing.

"Why Wolfgang?" Maxwell asked aloud.

"I told him not to fight it. The drawer, please? Won't you?" The drawers were liberally coated in blood.

Maxwell pulled away despite himself. "Ah. Hm. I'll soil my gloves."

"Please," Wilson asked. His eyes were very dark. His voice was quiet, without its usual righteous indignation. "It's only me here. They're all down with it. See, there's my boss."

A new body had appeared next to Wolfgang, an unpleasant-looking fellow with pince-nez and little white sideburns. Foaming blood dripped from his nose.

Maxwell shook his head and stepped away. There was a window nearby, a round glass pane, a hole cut into the flesh stucco. Maxwell looked through it and saw glittering eyes.

There They were. He tried to open the window, but it was sealed shut. He had a distant impression of laughter. Maxwell began to wonder now where the idea to do this experiment had really come from.

"I know this job isn't for everyone," Wilson said. "That's why I do it. I don't mind it at all. Except I'm tired and my back hurts and most of these people are bigger than me. I only want you to open the drawer."

"Ahem. Hurm. You're not going to drop this, eh? Fine. Which drawer?"

Wilson pointed. Maxwell walked across the floor- squelch, squelch- and pulled the wretched thing open. Inside was another corpse. This one had had its eyelids and lips chewed off by a rat, which nibbled contentedly from its perch on the deceased's nose. Well then.

The mutilated face stared at Maxwell with a sort of surprised grimace. "I've seen worse," Maxwell said. Wilson rushed over, so thoroughly and completely dismayed that Maxwell almost chuckled over it.

"Not again! Oh, no, no! I told them to put down traps!" He clutched at his hair. "We need the poison here, not at home!"

"This happens often, does it?" Wilson took hold of the rat's tail- or was it a rat? It no longer quite looked like any animal Maxwell could identify- and flung it against the wall, where it made an improbable fountain of gore. He slammed shut the drawer and opened the next.

Wendy lay in it, her hands folded on her chest, her blue eyes wide and placid. "Oh, you poor kid," Wilson said, with a sob. "No one can help you now." He kissed her forehead and eased the drawer shut.

Maxwell had never once suspected that this stunted manchild had any genuine concern for Wendy, and he felt a bit as if he'd intruded on something private and unseemly.

A distant sound. Barking. "Oh," said Wilson. "I'll never get this done. I've got to hide now, I have no armor." He pulled open another drawer and inside it was the opening to a flight of stairs. He climbed inside.

Though Maxwell was more than happy to leave this putrid little room, that was not the route he would have chosen. This section of the dream was vanishing fast, however, so he had to follow. He stepped onto the first stair and immediately was in a completely normal living room. Serviceable. Judging from the decor: decidedly middle-class, with transparent pretensions to upper. Urgh, that china cabinet.

Wilson meandered over to a low couch that sat by the wall and lay down on it. He was now wearing a very plain business suit, well-worn. His hands and knees were soaked with blood of no specific origin, and he'd tracked it across the floor.

"My boss won't be happy that I left," he said. "But I suppose he is dead. I'll have to go back and finish, though." He threw one arm across his face and sighed. He spoke in the toneless mumble of the sleep-talker and Maxwell wondered if in fact he was also speaking aloud out in the real world.

Maxwell studied the room. The wallpaper was floral and a touch overdone. There was a cloying smell of some sort of floral perfume in the air. A portrait of Webber and Wickerbottom hung over the fireplace. Both of them looked unhappy and there was a silhouette behind them with glowing, foggy eyes.

"This is my old house," said Wilson. "That picture shouldn't be here. Maybe you snuck it in to confuse me."

"I'm not sure why I would do that," Maxwell said.

A woman stepped into the room. A completely normal woman, if unusually petite, but at the sight of her Wilson sat bolt upright, stricken and pale. "Ma?"

She walked closer with tiny little footsteps on heels that, though making a valiant effort, could not raise her head higher than five feet at the most. She was a surprisingly pretty woman. Quite pale with loose black curls and dark eyes, like her son, but infinitely better groomed. "Hello, darling. It's so good to finally see you again. It took me so long to get out of that asylum! Why didn't you help me?" The plea in her voice verged on the melodramatic.

Wilson put a hand to his mouth and sat frozen and trembling. His mother came closer, sat next to him on the couch, took his hand. "It was awful in there. That little white room. You were in a little white room, Wilson, you know. They kept you in there and you wanted to die. Why did you let them put me away?"

Wilson appeared to be trying to speak but nothing would come out. His mother oh-so-sweetly covered his mouth. "And when you came to see me you left," she said. "Why would you leave? Oh, honey. I forgive you." Wilson tipped his head forward and closed his eyes. Something dark began to drip down the wall behind him. As black as night. Nightmare fuel.

An excited murmuring filled the air around them. There was a door, by the awful china cabinet (an item which was now blinking at him). Maxwell tried the knob. Nothing.

Fuel was dripping out of Wilson's sleeves and running down the backs of his hands. His mother took his face gently into her hands and- suddenly- she twisted sharply and there was a crack like a small, frozen twig-

Both men drew a gasp of air. The night breeze wafted across Maxwell's face. It was damp and cool, with scents of pine and campfire, and as it refreshed his skin he realized he was in a cold sweat.

The camp stood about them, deceptively solid. It was real, insofar as it was not a product of Wilson's sick little mind.

Wilson sat upright, breathing rapidly. The hair at the nape of his neck was plastered down with wet.

Maxwell shook his head slowly. He hoped Wilson wouldn't feel compelled to explain any of the dream.

He looked up at Maxwell. His color was never terribly good; when he was ill at ease he looked a bit dead. "Did you get what you needed?"

"You know- I think I'll shelve this idea. What do you think?"

Wilson's brow furrowed. "You're giving up after one experiment?"

Maxwell considered this for a moment. "Yes"

Wilson got to his feet, a trifle unsteady, and glowered. He was quite green, looked ready to vomit or fall into a very unromantic faint, but his voice had all of the cool disapproval of the most confidently disgruntled bank president that ever looked down his nose. "You are definitely not a scientist."

"And what a shame that is," said Maxwell, who could also be disgruntled as all get-out when he chose- but at the moment he only managed a distant disinterest.

"Thank you for wasting my time." Wilson's consonants were sharp, a trace of posh schooling. "Good night!"

"Goodnight, pal." He watched as Wilson stepped out of the circle of light, and kept watching until the flame of his torch had completely vanished into the distance.

He'd certainly seen worse things that Wilson could ever conceive of, and yet-

He felt better when the little man was out of sight.